HOUSE OF COMMONS

First Special Report from the

EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Session 1982–83

THE WORKING OF THE HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMISSION AND EXECUTIVE: ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE THE ROBENS REPORT

Observations by the Government and the Health and Safety Commission on the Sixth Report of the Committee in Session 1981–82

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The Employment Committee is appointed under SO No 86A to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department of Employment and associated public bodies, and similar matters within the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The Committee consists of a maximum of nine Members, of whom the quorum is three. Unless the House otherwise orders, all Members nominated to the Committee continue to be members of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

The Committee has power:

(a) to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place, and to report from time to time;

(b) to appoint persons with technical knowledge either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the Committee's order of reference.

The following were nominated as Members of the Committee on 26 November 1979.

Mr Jonathan Aitken
Mr Andrew Bowden
Mr Jim Craigen
Mr John Golding
Mr John Gorst
Mr Ray Powell
Mr Giles Radice
Mr John Townend
Mr Keith Wickenden

Mr John Golding was elected Chairman on 29 November 1979.

Mr John Townend was discharged and Mr Michael Colvin was added on 13 February 1981.

Mr Giles Radice was discharged and Dr Oonagh McDonald was added on 27 March 1981.

Dr Oonagh McDonald and Mr Ray Powell were discharged and Mr Greville Janner and Mr Frank R White were added on 5 February 1982.

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FIRST SPECIAL REPORT

The Employment Committee have agreed to the following Special Report:

We have received the following Memorandum from the Secretary of State for Employment.

Observations by the Government and the Health and Safety Commission on the Sixth Report of the Employment Committee, Session 1981–82 — The working of the Health and Safety Commission and Executive: Achievements since the Robens Report.

The Health and Safety Commission have considered what your Committee had to say in its Sixth Report and have produced a response that they have put to me to forward to you. This I hereby do.

I do not think there is anything that calls for comment from me other than to say, on the question of Ministerial responsibility for safety in the conveyance of radioactive materials, that I feel unable to add to my memorandum on this subject to which your Committee's Report refers.

8 November 1982

RESPONSE BY THE HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMISSION

1. The Commission have noted the Report of the Select Committee published on 14 July, which considered the working of the Health and Safety Commission and Executive and achievements since the Robens report. The Commission welcomes the Committee's recognition of the importance of health and safety work, and of the contribution made by the Commission and the Executive.

2. The Commission offer comments on four points made in the Report:

(i) The public relations policy of the Commission and the resources devoted to this aspect of its work (paragraphs 13 and 16 of the Report).

(ii) Ministerial responsibility for the transport of radioactive substances (paragraph 19 of the Report).

(iii) The need for more research and publicity in relation to occupational diseases (paragraph 22 of the Report).

(iv) Enforcement of section 6 of the HSW Act (paragraph 23 of the Report).

Public Relations Policy

3. In paragraphs 12–17 the Committee criticises the way the Commission carries out its obligations to provide advice and information on health and safety matters and recommends that we should review the activities of the publicity and press department in order to strengthen their impact on discussions of health and safety matters.

4. The Commission has considered the criticisms made by the Committee. Whatever effort and resources are put into publicity, the national media are not likely to devote substantial time and space to health and safety matters except in a few limited areas like nuclear power, or in cases where there is a major disaster. In such cases the Commission is able to obtain adequate opportunities to present the problems and what the Commission and Executive are doing. A good example would be the publicity surrounding the publication of the report on the safety of the proposed PWR reactor prepared by the NII.

5. The great majority of the Commission's work is concerned with detailed issues of concern to particular groups of workers or the general public. These groups are best reached through the scientific and technical press and through local newspapers, radio and TV as well as through the publication of a wide range of booklets and information sheets aimed at particular audiences. The Commission is convinced that it is right to deploy substantial resources in getting over its message through these channels.

6. Nevertheless the Commission accepts that there is a need to make sure that there is proper understanding throughout the community of the nature and scale of the hazards which can affect people both at work and away from it. Some risks are not well-understood and may be underestimated. In other cases fears may be exaggerated and the need is to put particular risks in proper perspective. The Commission will certainly review what is being done to see whether its effectiveness in this general field can be increased.

Ministerial Responsibility for the Transport of Radioactive Substances

7. The Committee say in paragraph 19 of their Report that they would see advantage in transferring Ministerial responsibility for safety in the conveyance of radioactive materials to the Secretary of State for Employment.

8. The present arrangements do not place responsibility on any one authority to look at the totality of the practical problems arising from the handling and transport of radioactive materials. The Commission recognises that Department of Transport and HSE officials concerned with these matters have recently been working in close co-operation, and that discussions aimed towards fitting together the legislative and other controls at present administered by Department of Transport with those which we are now preparing in respect of ionising radiation as a whole have made good progress. Our Technical Working Party on Ionising Radiation has recently set up a Sub-Group (on which CBI, TUC, HSE and Department of Transport will all be represented) to give further and more detailed consideration to how our proposals should be developed and applied in the field of transport; this will provide a good opportunity to examine more closely how the two sets of controls should be related and to make any appropriate recommendations.

Research and Publicity in Relation to Occupational Diseases

9. The Committee suggest in paragraph 22 that more research and publicity is necessary into the hazards of occupational diseases, so that the Commission's efforts in this field should be directed to the best advantage.

10. The Commission recognise the importance of giving adequate attention to health hazards as well as to safety. The published programme of work of the Commission sets out our balanced approach to both health and safety problems, taking account, where appropriate, of research being carried out by others. We have also been concerned from the start to ensure that inspectors are trained to give attention at the workplace to both health and safety problems and the balance is also reflected in the work of our advisory committees, including those we have set up for specific industries as well as those dealing with toxic substances and with medical matters.

11. A description of our current research effort concerned with occupational health is described in the Annex. It will be seen that this amounts to a substantial programme and that, for example, more than half of our extra-mural research is concerned with occupational health matters. While we would not disagree that more could be done usefully in this field, we think that we are doing all that we reasonably can within our present overall resources.

Enforcement of Section 6 of the HSW Act

12. The Commission welcomes the Committee's interest in the outcome of the closer attention which is now being given to the enforcement of section 6 of the HSW Act. Progress will be reported in the Commission's published Annual Report.

ANNEX

HSE'S PROGRAMME OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESEARCH

1. The HSE carries out a substantial programme of research into occupational health. There are of course limits on the funds and staff available for such research and priorities have had to be established. The programme of research consists of research done for the HSE under contract arrangements with other research organisations and in-house laboratory research and statistical studies. These are briefly described below.

The extra-mural research programme

2. The HSE's Employment Medical Advisory Service (EMAS) commissions research projects on occupational health from a number of bodies. In the current financial year, some £1.2 million will be spent on these projects, which amounts to more than half of the HSE's total extra-mural research programme. Almost half of the occupational health research projects are being undertaken on HSE's behalf by the Medical Research Council (16 projects) while the remainder (18 projects) is spread amongst Universities, medical schools and other research bodies.

3. The projects cover a wide range of subjects and may be sub-divided into groups under the headings of instrument and technique development, population studies, physical hazards, toxic substances, suspected hazardous substances and ergonomics.

4. Recently completed projects include:

(a) the development of immunological techniques for surveillance of populations at high risk of developing asbestos cancers.

(b) the effect of changes in daily activity on older workers.

5. Projects recently commissioned include:

(a) the cardio respiratory health of shipyard workers.

(b) carcinogen-induced DNA damage.

The in-house laboratory research programme

6. The HSE's Occupational Medicine and Hygiene Laboratory carries out a programme of research at Cricklewood, the main overall theme of which is concerned with methods of monitoring workers' exposure and response to toxic substances. This programme is relatively new and includes the following:

(a) A project designed to study the monitoring, metabolism and psychological effects of solvents is now supported by a computerised mathematical model for predicting the kinetics of uptake, distribution and elimination of solvent from the human body. Comparison of experimental results derived from volunteer studies and the computer-predicted results show that the computer model will help to devise suitable sampling strategies when monitoring worker exposure at the workplace.

(b) Biochemical changes following occupational exposure indicate interference with normal metabolic functions. A range of analyses indicating liver and kidney dysfunction have been offered to EMAS for some time, but now the measurement of thyroid hormones and plasma lipids is being performed to investigate the biochemical effects of exposure to such toxic hazards as chlorinated phenols and inorganic mercury.

(c) Methods for the determination of chromium and manganese in urine have been established and a study of a group of workers exposed to manganese in the steelmaking industry is under way. A collaborative programme with Birmingham University investigating workers exposed to cadmium is making good progress. Measurement of cadmium in blood and urine is being compared with measurements of liver and kidney cadmium made by *in vivo* neutron activation analysis. At the same time a range of blood and urinary analyses is performed to study changes in kidney function following cadmium accumulation by the workers in this study group.

(d) Immunological techniques have been used to investigate occupational allergy in a number of industries. Individual workers with occupational asthma have been investigated in collaboration with EMAS and the Brompton Hospital, and also several surveys of workforces have been performed to study the prevalence of occupational allergy. These studies have included workers exposed to acid anhydrides, food proteins, storage mites and a pharmaceutical preparation.

(e) Techniques have been established to investigate mutagenic activity in the urine of workers exposed to potential carcinogenic materials and processes. The factors influencing the development of mutagenic activity of urine (eg smoking) are being examined. The suitability of a modified Ames test and the newer "fluctuation" test for this work is being assessed.

The in-house statistical studies

7. The Epidemiology and Medical Statistics Unit of EMAS undertakes morbidity and mortality studies related to known or suspected industrial health hazards. The largest single operation, absorbing over half the Unit's available resources is the asbestos survey covering workers exposed to asbestos. Other current studies include morbidity studies of wood-treatment workers (exposed to pentachlorophenol) and contraceptive pill formulators (exposed to oestrogens) and mortality studies of foundry workers, styrene process workers and carbon black process workers. Studies of tin miners, glass reinforced plastic laminators and roadstone quarry miners are at the planning stage.

8. Two studies have been published in the last three years: a 10-year mortality study of workers in the rubber industry and a preliminary report on the mortality of a group of acrylonitrile polymerisation workers.

9. The EMAS regional field force also undertakes occasional small scale studies prompted by problems and clues arising in the course of their routine work.

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